

# The Briefing



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## The four judgements of God

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The judgement of God is a much misunderstood, and seldom discussed topic. One of our mistakes is to assume that all of God's judgement lies in the future.

What is God's judgement? This is something most people don't understand, still less think about. And, if they do think about it, they are likely to think of hell—of fire and brimstone (whatever that is), of medieval torture and demons and suchlike. That's what hell is all about, isn't it?

What is more, the judgement of hell is somewhere else and sometime in the future. It is rare that people think of anything in this world as God's judgement. Well, not seriously. There might be a minor newspaper column about some 'fanatics' who suggest some earthquake or other is God's judgement on the wicked. But real people don't believe it. We're beyond that.

However, it is a sober, biblical fact that God does indeed judge people, and some of the consequences of that judgement are lived out in this world at this time. God does not leave everything to the final judgement day. He doesn't like people rebelling against him, and he doesn't like the immoral activities people get up to in the process. So he lets them know, here and now—if they have eyes to see it.

How, then, does God judge? Here are four ways the Bible teaches that God exercises his judgement.

Firstly, God actually gives us considerable space for our own decisions. He allows us to make our own decisions, and respects those decisions, by allowing us to live them out. What we often don't realize is that this is judgement. We are treated as responsible individuals who make our own life choices, and those disastrous choices are allowed to spill out into our lives.

Consider the description of this process in [Romans 1:18-25](http://www.gnpceb.org/esv/search/?q=Romans%201:18-25) (<http://www.gnpceb.org/esv/search/?q=Romans%201:18-25>). In rejecting God, people chose to follow their own lusts and desires. What did God do in response? He let them do it. He gave them over to their lusts. He gave them over to a depraved mind. He allowed them to live as they wanted.

When God gives us our desires, it's awful; the way we want to live doesn't work. This is not surprising. After all, our decision started with a lie—that God is not really God—so it's no wonder things have gone downhill from there. We ignore God's instructions about how to make the most of our relationships, our desires, our bodies and our communities, and make up our own rules in defiance. Unfortunately for all of us, God lets us. He allows us to implement lifestyles that are bound to go wrong because they start from a false premise. He allows us to set up rules that are bound to encourage all the worst things, because they are in defiance of his rules, which encourage all the best things.

Injustice rules the world because we live without God. If individuals and communities followed God, we would avoid much suffering. For example, if God's rules for sexual relationships were followed, we'd avoid the disease, depression and suicide that rips apart the lives of the sexually immoral. We would avoid the desperate plight of teenage single mothers and the stress on their children. If God's rules about treating other people were followed, we would not have battered wives or street crime or muggings. If we lived by God's rules of forgiveness, we would not have vendettas and wars.

Of course, we do not do it. We're so perverse that, even if we want to follow God's way, we fail dismally. But part of God's punishment for our perversity is to let us lead the lives we've chosen. That's why the world is in such a bad state that you wonder if there's a God at all. And so we invent the problem of evil, saying that a loving and powerful God could not possibly allow the world to be as it is. But it's evidence of God's love, his respect and consideration for us, and his justifiable anger at us, that he lets the world be as bad as it is. We don't want him as our God? He give us up to our choice. All the worse for us.

Secondly, there is a more specific kind of judgement. Occasionally, God punishes particular people for particular sins. One church in ancient Corinth was being sinful about the Lord's supper, and so God sent illness on them. Plagues in Egypt were specific punishments for not letting Israel go free. It does sometimes happen. But we only know if it is a specific punishment for specific sin when God tells us. Otherwise, we don't know; it may well be the general sickness that is part of the picture since we have cut ourselves off from God.

Of course, thirdly, there is the day of judgement. That is that day, after death, when we will all face the judgement of God. This is not a popular subject. The subject of death is unpopular enough, but *judgement* after death—we hate that.

We can perhaps just cope with the idea of annihilation, as long as we don't think about it too much. But the idea of continuation after death—of being held accountable for how we have lived—that scares us—with good reason, too, when we reflect for a moment on how we have lived.

Judgement after death may be a fearful prospect, but the opposite—annihilation—is awful too. If there is only 'ceasing to be', then all your actions are meaningless. Any good you do is pointless; you'll end up in the coffin just like the serial murderer. If death is all, you may resolve the horror of judgement after death, but the cost is high: you create the angst of a life that is totally absurd and pointless. If I am to be held accountable after death, then at least my life mattered; at least I am a person, and I will be treated as a person who made real choices. The day of judgement will show they were real choices.

The problem is, of course, that they were such lousy choices.

Ultimately, God's patience will run out and he will destroy this world. He will create a new heaven and earth where there is no evil. People often ask, "Why doesn't God destroy evil?" The answer is that he will. "Why doesn't he do it now?" The person asking that question ought to think carefully about what they are asking; for, when God destroys evil, he will destroy *all* evil. In everything. In everyone. In you.

But, fourthly, there is another judgement—the judgement that God takes on himself. He does so in order to pardon us, for he cannot ignore evil; he is a just God. He cannot just forget the crimes we have committed and forgive the guilty as if what they did didn't matter. ("Ten million Russians, Stalin? Oh well, boys will be boys.") If God is a God of justice, he can't just wipe it away.

And yet he doesn't want to destroy us. So, in taking judgement onto himself, he has done something wonderful. Jesus came into the world to bear *our* sin. Jesus cried out "My God, why have you forsaken me?". He who was God, who lived in perfect unity with his Father for all eternity, was abandoned by him in judgement. God took it on himself. In the death of Jesus, we see the judgement of God that we don't have to suffer, because he did.

In all this, God treats us as responsible creatures. He treats us as if what we do matters—as if *we* matter. He warns us that we are not going the right way, and gives us time to realize this and change. He gives us dignity and morality and values. He gives us the truth that enables us to say, "Suffering is terrible". It is awful, it should make us cry. We can say with conviction and in truth what we long to say from experience—that something has gone terribly wrong.

But because of the fourth kind of judgement, a new life is possible. We can become new people who don't make quite such stupid choices. Even in this world of judgement—even though we catch disease and will grow old and die—even here we can live with purpose and relationship and justice. And we will not face judgement after death; instead, for us, there will be eternal life. And when God does clean up the world, we will be part of the new heavens and earth. That is why God took his own judgement upon himself. That is why it only makes sense to follow him.

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